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A couple of Curios

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The title of this article might lead you to believe it is about rare, unusual or intriguing objects but it is in fact about two well known succulent daisies! These curios are members of the Asteraceae (formerly the Compositae), the plant family that includes the even more familiar dandelions, daisies, ragworts, cinerarias and others. Until recently the succulent members of this family were usually included in just two genera: *Senecio* and *Othonna*. This was the position adopted in the most recent book on these plants (Rowley, 1994). However, with the application of modern molecular techniques based on DNA studies the large genus *Senecio*, comprising over 1,500 species with a worldwide distribution, is gradually being fragmented into smaller, better defined and more manageable genera. This process for these succulents may well not be completed for many years.

The genus *Curio* was actually first proposed nearly 20 years ago (Heath, 1997), long before the advent of modern molecular techniques, but it is only now that it is being adopted, since it is strongly supported by DNA-based evidence. *Curio* comprises a small genus of around 20 species, formerly included in *Senecio* that are all low-growing, creeping or sprawling succulents with daisy-like flowers. The genus was named by Paul Heath after Gaius Scribonius Curio, Roman orator. Species occur mainly in South Africa with a few in southern Namibia. Here I'll introduce just two curios.

The first species is well known with the common name of 'Candle Plant' but is usually encountered as *Senecio articulatus*. This plant has a long history since it was first collected in the Cape Province by the intrepid Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg and

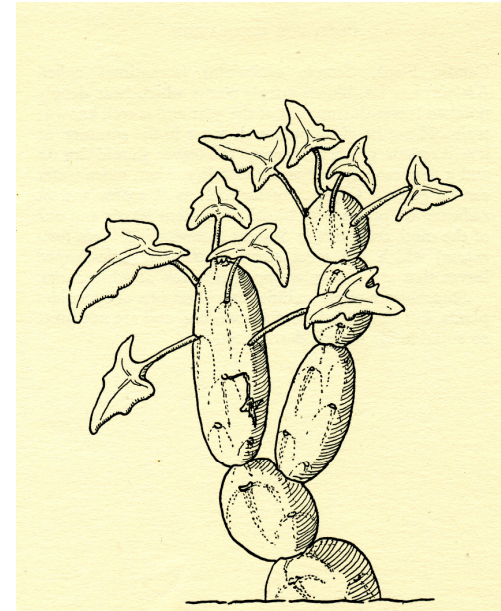


Figure 1. Sketch of *Curio articulatus* by Vera Higgins (Higgins, 1949).

Figure 2. Hand coloured painting of *Curio articulatus* (De Candolle & Redouté, 1799–1837).



Top: Figure 3. *Curio articulatus* in a 15 cm diameter pan.

Bottom: Figure 4. *Curio articulatus* 'Candlelight'.

was introduced into cultivation in 1775. It has had several names including: *Cacalia articulata* (1782), *Cacalia laciniata* (1799), *Kleinia articulata* (1812), *Senecio articulatus* (1845) and most recently *Curio articulatus* (1997).

It has been featured in a number of famous books on succulents and has been drawn or painted by several artists, two examples of which are included here. Figure 1 shows a simple line drawing by Vera Higgins, a leading figure in the UK succulent scene after World War II. Mrs Higgins, as many will know, was a former President of the NCSS, forerunner of the BCSS. In contrast Figure 2 is a more elaborate and elegant water colour painting by Redouté from a sumptuous work on succulents. This was a collaborative venture between the Swiss botanist Augustin Pyramus De Candolle (1778–1841) and the renowned French botanical artist Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840). Its Latin title is *Plantarum Succulentarum Historia*, whilst in French this is *Histoire Naturelle des Plantes Grasses*. It was published during the golden age of extravagant folio botanical works for which no expense was spared. The book was published in parts over a long period of time and includes over 200 beautifully hand coloured plates of succulents (De Candolle & Redouté, 1799–1837).

Figure 3 shows my plant in cultivation, clearly indicating why the plant was named '*articulatus*' from its '*jointed*' stems. It forms sprawling masses of erect to creeping well-branched stems with ivy-like leaves. Here in England the plant is a winter-grower, so spends the summer in a leafless state. Stems and leaves have a waxy blue-grey covering, making the name 'Candle Plant' very apt.



Left: Figure 5. *Curio rowleyanus* (left) and the variegated cultivar 'String-of-Pearls' (right).

There is also a very attractive variegated form described by Rowley (1994) as 'Candlelight', which for me (Figure 4), has a denser arrangement of leaves than the non-variegated plant. Gordon described this as having "leaves broadly margined in light yellow", but my plant has leaves that range in colour from being flushed with pale pink to deep purple underneath. Although this variegate is fairly stable, it has a tendency to revert to the standard bluish-green form, so needs to be maintained by judicious pruning.

My second, perhaps, curious *Curio* is *C. rowleyanus* which is probably the commonest species in cultivation, since this 'String-of-beads Senecio' is so readily propagated from even just small pieces of stem. It was first named by the renowned German succulent plant specialist Herman Jacobsen to honour Gordon Rowley in 1968 and became a *Curio* in 1997. It has virtually spherical leaves, each with a small pimple, or technically a mucro, and a conspicuous window. This species has also developed into a variegated mutant, the origin of which is unknown, but was named very appropriately as 'String-of-Pearls' (Rowley, 1994). The two forms are shown together in Figure 5. The cultivar has leaves overlaid with a cream colour, giving the pearl-like quality that gave rise to its name. Both forms are best grown as hanging pot or basket plants.

When this species was first described it was only known in cultivation without a natural location. Later it was rediscovered in the wild by John Lavranos in Springbokvlakte, 18 km S. of Kleinpoort, Steytlerville Karoo in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (Rowley, 1994).

Bizarrely, *C. rowleyanus* has become a religious symbol since it was marketed in the US in the 1970s as the "rosary bead plant" (Rowley, 1994). The advert said that "the serene beauty of this remarkable creation will give you a lifetime of happiness". Need I say more!

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